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MISTAKEN ATTITUDES TOWARD DEATH

THE preoccupation of existentialist thinkers with death and their painful agonizing over it have lately brought about something of a revival in philosophic reflection on human mortality. In his stimulating but erratic book, *The Faith of a Heretic*,¹ Walter Kaufmann sharply criticizes the views on death of Kierkegaard and Heidegger, of Sartre and Camus. While I agree with much in these criticisms and in Kaufmann's volume as a whole, he finally reaches conclusions about death that I consider almost as unacceptable as those of the existentialists. I quote:

If one lives intensely, the time comes when sleep means bliss. If one loves intensely, the time comes when death seems bliss. . . . The life I want is a life I could not endure in eternity. It is a life of love and intensity, suffering and creation, that makes life worth while and death welcome. There is no other life I prefer. Neither should I like not to die. . . . For most of us death does not come soon enough. Lives are spoiled and made rotten by the sense that death is distant and irrelevant. One lives better when one expects to die, say, at forty, when one says to oneself long before one is twenty: whatever I may be able to accomplish, I should be able to do by then; and what I have not done then, I am not likely to do ever. One cannot count on living until one is forty—or thirty—but it makes for a better life if one has a rendezvous with death. Not only love can be deepened and made more intense and impassioned by the expectation of impending death; all life is enriched by it (372–373).

In some forty years of reading in the religious and philosophic literature concerning death, I have rarely found a statement that seems so perverse as the one just cited. If what Kaufmann says about loving intensely is not just poetic extravagance and is to be taken seriously, then I must seriously retort that it runs counter to common sense and human psychology. Just why should the rapture of love make us "welcome" the nothingness of death? Why not the continued rapture of love? Kaufmann's sleep-death metaphor is just as misleading in the year 1963 A.D. as in the year 463 B.C. when the ancient Greeks were already toying with it. Death is about the last thing to occupy the thoughts of

¹ New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1963.

a man and woman passionately in love; and the more intense their feelings, the more unlikely it is that they regard the complete extinction of themselves and their love as some sort of "bliss."

As for Kaufmann's assertions, "For most of us death does not come soon enough" and "One lives better when one expects to die, say, at forty," I am frankly dumbfounded. For these remarks imply that it is preferable to die in the very prime of life. According to Kaufmann, I ought to feel rather ashamed that I am nearing sixty-three and am still in good condition. Evidently, Kaufmann expects the generality of mankind to be youthful geniuses and accomplish all their best work by the time they are forty. Yet the briefest glance at the history of highest literary, artistic, and cultural achievement shows what an enormous proportion of it has resulted from the energies of persons well beyond that age.

Apparently, too, for Kaufmann the science of medicine has for a long time been on the wrong track by concerning itself with individuals over forty and by gradually increasing the span of life, so that today in the United States the average life expectancy is more than seventy years. If he is consistent, Kaufmann should prefer the situation in India, still a country of appalling poverty, starvation, overpopulation, ill health, and lack of medical facilities, where the average life expectancy is only forty-two.

"Whatever I may be able to accomplish," avers Kaufmann, "I should be able to do by then" (by forty). Not a word about enjoyment or pleasure, or the leisurely delights of retirement, old age, or perhaps being a grandparent. Kaufmann adds: "What I have not done then [by forty], I am not likely to do ever."

The plain facts do not bear out this judgment. Consider the thirty-six Presidents of the United States: not one of them became Chief Executive until after he was forty, and the three greatest—Jefferson, Lincoln, and Franklin D. Roosevelt—were not inaugurated until they were over fifty. Moreover, the truly creative individual, no matter what his age, rarely feels that his work is done; new tasks, new vistas keep opening up for him. I think especially of three active nonagenarians, all philosophers, whom I have been privileged to know personally: William Ernest Hocking, Alexander Meiklejohn,² and Bertrand Russell. These persons all happen to be well known, but there are thousands of others in the same age group who have carried on with useful work. These various considerations lead me to say that the ideal should be to

² Professor Meiklejohn died at the age of ninety-two on December 16, 1964, after this article was in type. He was distinguished not only as a philosopher, but also as an educator and an uncompromising civil-libertarian.

live to at least twice forty, thus increasing by a decade the traditional goal of three-score years and ten.

Finally, I take issue with Kaufmann's assertion that "all life is enriched" by "the expectation of impending death." The joys and values of human living are valid and worthwhile in and of themselves; they stand on their own feet and need no ratification, either by some supernatural god or through comparison with the realm of death. The great consummatory experiences, the moments and moods of exaltation that come from knowing beauty or love, do not depend in the slightest on any sense of imminent death. Psychologically, an individual who is constantly aware of impending death is usually saddened by the thought in a way that hardly enriches his day-to-day existence. When Kaufmann declares that "it makes for a better life if one has a rendezvous with death," he is suggesting an exaggerated consciousness of death that is only too reminiscent of the Christian viewpoint. He reminds me here of the story about the man who re-read his will every night before retiring, fearing that he might not survive until morning.

All in all, then, Kaufmann's attitude toward death, in the passages I have cited, appears to me fantastically out of joint. Even if in these comments he intended merely to strike a poetic pose, it does not come off and remains essentially a strained and lugubrious meditation on man's fate.

II

Charles Hartshorne is another philosopher with whose views on death I emphatically disagree. He writes in *The Personalist*:

No animal endowed with much power of memory ought to live forever, or could want to, I should maintain; for the longer it lives, the more that just balance between novelty and repetition, which is the basis of zest and satisfaction, must be upset in favor of repetition, hence of monotony and boredom. Old animals, and old people, in principle (exceptions are in degrees only) are bored animals and bored people. This is not essentially a glandular or circulatory phenomenon. It is psychological: one has felt and done most of the things that must be felt and done so many times before.

As Jefferson wrote to a friend: "I am tired of putting my clothes on every morning and taking them off every evening." Thus, he concluded, the Creator prepares us for death. Thus indeed. That many old people are spry and eager only proves that their chronological age gives but a rough index of psychological age. Thus all complaint against death itself seems misguided. Death is needed for the solution of an aesthetic problem, how memory is to be reconciled with zest.³

I must take issue with Hartshorne's analysis from start to finish. I am an animal with a pretty good memory and in full

³ *The Personalist* (Autumn, 1958): 387.

control of my mental faculties. And though I wrote a book, *The Illusion of Immortality*,⁴ in order to show that there can be no survival of the human personality after death, I nonetheless *do* want to live forever, provided I maintain fairly good health and a satisfactory economic standard of existence. Obviously, nobody would desire the eternal life of a senile mind and decrepit body.

Many people commit suicide because they feel too unhappy to go on living, or because they meet some shattering setback, or because they are mentally abnormal. I suppose that some individuals kill themselves out of sheer boredom. However, I cannot accept for a moment the claim that human beings in general are bound to become so bored with life that they are glad to have it end. Jefferson's remark about dressing and undressing was, with all due respect to that great man, a trivial one to support the solemn conclusion he drew from it. Dressing and undressing, and many other routine actions needful for day-to-day existence, ought ordinarily to become habits that require but little conscious effort.

Hartshorne asserts: "Old animals, and old people, in principle (exceptions are in degree only) are bored animals and bored people." This could be true of beasts, fish, and birds, but the possession of mind in man does make quite a difference. Owing to the immense progress of medicine and health over the last hundred years, old age in the more highly developed societies does not usually now begin until a man is, say, seventy. Yet I have known so many individuals between seventy and ninety who never got bored with life, that I refuse to admit they were all exceptions "in degree" or in any other way. On the other hand, I have known a few people who were bored with well-nigh everything at the age of twenty-three, thirty-three, or fifty-three. Such individuals will find their existence tedious if they reach old age, since they always did.

Actually, this pleasant earth and the many different countries and cultures that have developed upon it provide endless varieties of experience for an alert and vigorous person. How many centuries would it take for an educated man to learn all the world's languages and read all the good books in every field that have been published since the invention of the printing press? How many aeons would a lover of Nature require to view and explore all the scenic beauties of this planet, including those of America's National and State Parks? Such questions show how easily the imagination can conceive of unlimited opportunities

⁴ New York: Philosophical Library, 1959.

for human beings to enjoy the continued novelty and zest that are needed, according to Hartshorne, to make life worth while.

For the sake of argument, I have been assuming that Hartshorne is correct when he asserts that zest and satisfaction are dependent on a "just balance between novelty and repetition." However, I now wish to say that I think his psychology here is unsound. In the first place, much that is novel is unpleasant; any new type of pain, for example, is hardly the sort of experience one would seek in order to give life zest.

In the second place, I deny that repetition *as such* leads necessarily to "monotony and boredom." Consider, for instance, the basic biological drives of thirst, hunger, and sex. Pure, cool water is the best drink in the world, and I have been drinking it for sixty-two years. If we follow through with Hartshorne, I ought to be so tired of water by this time that I seek to quench my thirst solely by wine, beer, and coca cola! Yet I still love water. By the same token, the average person does not fall into a state of ennui through the satisfaction of hunger or sexual desire.

Hartshorne states "Death is needed for the solution of an aesthetic problem, how memory is to be reconciled with zest." Here again I must disagree. *My* memories of happy experiences—whether of listening to a Beethoven symphony, reading poetry or philosophy, rejoicing in the play of my grandchildren, skiing down a snow-covered slope in Vermont, or viewing beautiful vistas of forest, stream, and mountain—such memories do not make me feel, "How dreadfully tired I am of all that!" Instead, they give me a zest for encores.

What Hartshorne forgets, it seems to me, is that while constant repetition of the identical experience may well cause boredom, a repeated *cycle of variety* does not have the same effect. Characteristic human activities such as eating, traveling, making love, writing books, reading books, going to plays and concerts, painting pictures, dancing, working creatively, and exercising in the open air can be carried on in patterns of variety that seldom give rise to monotony.

These, then, are some of the reasons why, despite Hartshorne's remarks, I would rejoice in living on as an immortal upon our earth or in some other place equally attractive. Now either he or someone else is going to call these sentiments of mine extremely egoistic. Yet they are mainly an extension of the innate urge for self-preservation; and in any case a large degree of self-interest is ethically legitimate in the motivations of any human being. I suggest, however, that my position stems primarily from a profound sense of the sweetness and splendor of life.

III

In a thoughtful and provocative paper, "Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life,"⁵ Sidney Hook tells us that the essence of tragedy in human life resides in the moral conflict of choosing between two ethical goods, between the good and the right (with the right representing obligation or duty), or between two rights. He discusses the implications of death for his theme and concludes that "death as such is not a tragic phenomenon and that its presence does not make the world and our experience within it tragic" (13).

Of course, death *as such* in the economy of Nature and the course of biological development is clearly neither an evil nor a tragedy. Man would never have evolved had not the great institution of death given strictest meaning to the survival of the fittest in evolution and eliminated unprogressive species from the earth. Death has served man in another way. For ever since he appeared on this planet he has depended preponderantly upon the death of animal, plant, and vegetable forms for food, clothing, fuel, housing, and many other essentials of living.

Hook's discussion, however, pertains solely to the death of human beings. Life having brought them into existence, is it tragic that death should terminate that existence? I certainly agree with Hook that death for human beings, despite all the grief and anguish it evokes, does not in itself justify the conclusion that man's life as a whole is tragic. But this does not logically rule out the judgment that death for some men or all men is "a tragic phenomenon."

With my disbelief in any sort of personal immortality, a position that Hook shares with me, I have come to think over the years that death, with all its implications, is a blow of such magnitude and finality that it is always a thing of tragic dimensions—to the person who dies, or his intimate survivors, and usually to both. If the deceased was widely known and beloved in the community, his death can be a tragedy for many people—indeed for millions or tens of millions—who were not personally acquainted with him. Such was the case when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in November, 1963. Even when death is a relief from painful and incurable illness, it seems tragic that the only remedy should be the total obliteration of the personality.

⁵ Presidential address delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Division of The American Philosophical Association, Dec. 28-30, 1959, *Proceedings and Addresses of The American Philosophical Association, 1959-1960* (Yellow Springs, Ohio: Antioch Press, 1960), pp. 5-26.

Obviously, when death strikes someone who is young or in the prime of life, the tragedy is worse.

For me there is tragedy, too, in the death of the old, even of those in their eighties and nineties. Some of the greatest scenes in literature concern the death of aged persons, throwing a searchlight on the living, such as that of the grandmother in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* and of the central character in Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Ilyich*. As I said in my comments on Walter Kaufmann, I know a number of individuals over ninety who are still carrying on with wonderful vitality and mental acumen. Mankind can ill afford to lose such wise and useful citizens. And the death of anyone whom we love, no matter how advanced his age, stabs deep into the heart and leaves a lasting pang.

It is evident that, although I am in agreement with Hook's conception of the tragic insofar as it goes, I would extend the definition in accordance with more popular usage to include events that give rise to great suffering and sorrow. It is revealing that *Webster's New International Dictionary* includes "death" in the very meaning of "tragic." Its second definition of 'tragic' reads: "Characterized by, or involving, death or calamity or the suffering implied in tragedy; terrible; calamitous."⁶

In my opinion, death is additionally a tragedy because it represents a clash—and this is more in line with Hook's analysis—between two goods or values that are basically inconsistent with each other. Death is a genuine value in that it ensures room upon this earth for the onflowing, ever newborn generations of humanity. And as Hook observes, "it gives us some assurance that no evil or suffering lasts forever. . . . It washes the earth clean of what cannot be cleansed in any other way" (12).

At the same time non-death is hypothetically a value in that it would preserve human individuals with their almost limitless possibilities for growth, achievement, and happiness; would avert the wholesale waste of men and women of widest experience who have reached the peak of their social functioning; and would prevent the deep shock and enduring sorrow, often of a traumatic character, that come from the loss of loved ones.

IV

In my view, death is simply one of the many different kinds of tragedy that human beings encounter; yet unique because it is inevitable and universal. The mature philosopher never at-

⁶ *Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language*, 2nd ed. (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam, 1954), p. 2685.

tempts to mask the tragic aspects of death. But he is not pre-occupied with death; nor does he permit it, on account of the heartache and crisis it causes, to overshadow in his philosophy the other phases of human existence. Nor does he cry out against death in the manner of Dylan Thomas in his lines:

*Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

No, the wise man, be he philosopher or otherwise, looks at death with honesty, dignity, and calm, recognizing that the tragedy it brings is inherent in the great gift of life.

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COMMENTS AND CRITICISM

MUSICAL FORM REGAINED

IN a recent article,* Joan Stambaugh puts a paradoxical problem concerning music as paradoxically as possible. She seeks to arrive at the musical *Gestalt* from the single, perishing tone; to derive structure from succession, form from matter, continuity from the actually sounding musical moment. Music, she says, acquires extent only in virtue of its instantaneous nature (278). This is much like trying to overtake the tortoise!

In effect, Miss Stambaugh investigates time, not music. She identifies musical form with musical time, which is "formed time." Her two questions about music as a temporal form appear to be paraphrases of those raised in criticism of Newton's "absolute time," rephrased in terms of her central thesis: that uniquely in music, time transcends the "imposed dualism" of form and content. Time, she says, has always been considered a form in which something happens; but in music, time itself happens; how then is this not time happening in time? And although she contrasts "differentiated" musical time with the equable flow of "abstract time," the problem still remains: how is time regulated according to its own, not external, laws?

Miss Stambaugh centers her problem on two dichotomies: form/content and subject/object. Her solution is a drastic reduction of the "content" of music to "matter" and ultimately to "concrete stuff," time-ness itself: (1) The basic fact about music is the transient nature of the single tone, which must therefore be repeated in order to be materially renewed, a "platitude" which

* Joan Stambaugh, "Music as a Temporal Form," this JOURNAL, 61, 9 (Apr. 23, 1964): 265-280.